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On the Problem of Literary Influence*

In Two Parts—Part II

And as to subject matter, the problem is still more vexatious. Is destructive wrath always Homeric? Could no Roman have ever thought of the dawn as rosy? Was Posidonius the only person who noticed that ingots of metal, smelted by forest fires, sometimes took the form of the natural mold in the ground? Was Vergil indebted to Euripides Phoeniss. 834 τυφλοὶ πόδες for his caeca vestigia in Aen. VI, 30? Yet Norden thinks so, and Sandys³ refers the play of light reflected on the ceiling in Aen. VIII, 22 to Opoll. Rhod. III, 755. And Kiessling would have Horace's illi robur et aes triplex circa pectus erat (C. I, 3, 9) indebted to Homer Il. XXIV, 205, σιδήρειόν νύ τοι ἦτορ as if a man could not have a brave heart defended by Roman armor even if the Iliad had never been written. And could not a Roman jar ring true or false without Plato, Theaet. 179 d? Pereant qui nostra ante nos dixerunt the Romans may well say if they are to be excluded from all original reference to natural phenomena. And in the things of daily life, because some Greek earlier in time has mentioned a thing or used a trivial illustration, has he thereby filed a mortgage never to be released? If in the Rig-Veda we find cloud mountains and missile thunderbolts, is Greek thereby indebted to Sanskrit, and is the agreement in metaphor a proof of indebtedness otherwise unsuspected? Could Lucretius not have noticed the sheep grazing on a distant hill, independently of a Greek who saw Greek sheep doing the same? And when Cicero speaks of fluctus concionum must this frequent metaphor of sedition from the waves of the sea be referred to Homer B 144 sq? Are we to accept the principle that whenever a Greek has mentioned anything whatever that the later Roman is indebted to that Greek?

And what shall we say to the establishing of an unknown Greek as the common originator of a thought expressed by a Latin writer and also by a Greek later in time? Or to a criticism that insists that a thought is too fine for Roman originality and hence must be due to some unknown Greek? Yet this position has really been taken repeatedly by Norden in his commentary on Aeneid VI; yet even he has to say regretfully on verse 610 aut qui divitiis soli incubuere repertis "ein analoger Ausdrucks scheint im Griechischen zu fehlen"; so hard is it to admit that even once Vergil may be original; and we may read between Norden's lines the hope that the new found papyri may yet supply the "analogous expression". Perhaps if we had a memoir of Vergil as we have one of Tennyson we should find something like this: But there is, I fear, a prosaic set growing up among us, editors of booklets, book worms, index hunters, or men of great memories, and no imagination, who *impute themselves* to the poet, and so believe that *he*, too, has no imagination, but is forever poking his nose between the pages of some old volume in order to see what he can appropriate. They will not allow one to say 'Ring the bell' without finding that we have taken it from Sir P Sidney, or even to use such a simple expression as the ocean 'roars' without finding out the precise verse in Homer or Horace from which we have plagiarized it (fact!)".⁶

Now when Lucretius in his sixth book describes the plague at Athens and we can see that Thucydides describes it in much the same way, gives the same order of symptoms and the same progress of the disease, and uses largely the same technical words, we do not hesitate to say that there is imitation. And when in some parts of his poem we find Lucretius following about the same order in his discussions as Epicurus does in the letters which survive, we declare without qualification that Lucretius is following Epicurus, particularly as the poet tells more than once that he follows in his master's footsteps. And when he describes the abodes of the blessed

³ Hist Class Scholarship 270

⁶ Tennyson, Memoirs I 258

gods in III, 18-22 in words which might serve as a translation of Homer Od. VI, 42 sq, we admit immediately the imitation.

And so we may set up as the first and surest canon that of translation: where a Latin writer translates a Greek author, that is, where he has borrowed a description of considerable length from a Greek source, we may be sure that there is influence. The insistence on length will exclude mere floscules like *caeca saxa* (Aen. III, 706) where Norden cites *τυφλαὶ σπιλάδες* A. P. VII 275, 2. I knew of hidden rocks and blind reefs in a New England river long before I had ever read Vergil or heard of the Palatine Anthology. A man by virtue of his eyes will see some things, by virtue of his ears will hear some things, and by virtue of his brains is sure to conceive and express some things. By virtue of common humanity much is common to all peoples that is common to human experience, and within this sphere there can be no debt of imitation. And so certain trivial thoughts may be paralleled and illustrated from all literatures just as fables and religious myths have a general similarity; and within this sphere Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, English, Norse and Choctaw are equally original and equally novel; for all of us, says Bentley,⁷ no no mean authority, when accused by a homunculus erulitione mediocri. ingenio nullo, of stealing learning, — all of us touch on many things without knowing that they have been already preëempted by others; and Terence before had said (Eun. 41) *nullum est iam dictum quod non dictum sit prius*.

My second canon, then, is that the thought must be to such a degree individualistic, so profound or so light or so clear or whatever character it may have to stamp it as singular and peculiar, that when we meet it we say such a conception is the work of a master mind and is not likely to have occurred to any one else. Such an expression is found in Aen. VI, 743 *quisque suos patimur manis*; and when Ausonius, Ephem. Oratio, 57, says *patiturque suos mens saucia manes* we insist that Ausonius is here an imitator of Vergil. And a third canon, but of much less weight, is our knowledge of the personality of a writer. If he is a scholar like Ausonius and we continually find in him reminiscences of the great authors, we are justified in calling him an imitator, just as we detect quotations and paraphrases in his modern counterparts. And when Cicero tells us that his philosophical treatises are mere *ἀπόγραφα* (if by *talia* he has them in mind) and of

himself *verba tantum adfero quibus abundo*,⁸ we naturally expect to find Greek originals somewhere, sooner or later.

Lastly, with the poets, metrical usage is important, particularly in Latin literature. Zingerle has pointed out Ovid's indebtedness to his predecessors and has shown that he, over and over again, uses cadences and verse endings that had become conventional in the hexameter and pentameter. The dactylic hexameter is so artificial a metre for an iambic language such as the Latin that when a dactyl was forged for the fifth foot it was a treasure not to be despised, and a combination of dactyl and spondee was something worth keeping. Hence it is not remarkable that in Ovid there are apparent reminiscences of Ennius, Lucretius and Vergil, most of which are not so much conscious imitations as part of the raw material of the poet's workshop and to be compared with his vocabulary, and even his syntax. I should, then, attach little significance to these agreements in verse technique as a sign of influence. In our own English we are in the habit of using stereotyped phrases which are not to be referred to any particular source. Some of them may be traced, to be sure, to the English bible and to Shakespeare, but they have become incorporated into the treasury of popular expression just as common words have been. Who would say that the Yankee who "guesses" is imitating Chaucer?

Thus from one point of view all literature is imitative and there is no new thing under the sun. As we grow older we find that our action is not free as we supposed in early youth; that we are born into a world of fixed law, and that our individuality is hemmed in by narrowing walls. In our conduct of life we find barriers erected on every side, — laws of convention, of social usage, of tradition; a standard has been erected on this side and on that. And the penalty for transgression is death ultimately. No matter how unreasonable English orthography is, it must be followed under the penalty that is given to folly on the one hand or to ignorance on the other. There are shibboleths of pronunciation, niceties of expression, words and conceptions that are taboo. We follow our authorities and thus confess influence in the plainest way. The problem, then, of tracing literary influence is the selection of that which being exceptional and personal in any one author is found also

⁷ On Cic Tusc IV 21

⁸ Ad Att XII 52 3

in the work of another who follows in time, and to discover in the second writer the personal and individual peculiarities that mark the first one as separate and distinct from his contemporaries and predecessors.

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